

*Developmental Education: An Overview of Current Issues  
and Future Directions*

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## Developmental Education: An Overview of Current Issues and Future Directions

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Each year, millions of students enroll in colleges and universities across the country with the hope of earning skills, training, and most importantly, a degree that will allow them to pursue their dreams. All too often though, students encounter an immediate obstacle: When institutions deem students unprepared for credit-bearing coursework in math and English, they are required to enroll in *developmental* or *remedial* courses. These classes are designed to be prerequisites to credit-bearing classes. Developmental courses help students build foundational knowledge in one or more subject areas and provide supplemental support for them as they complete their degree or certificate programs (Boylan & Bonham, 2007).

Developmental education is widespread and is offered in nearly every state across the country. Virtually all community colleges offer some form of remediation course, and approximately 70% of four-year institutions offer remediation education courses. Additionally, most institutions provide some form of learning assistance programs and/or tutoring in addition to remedial courses to aid with students' learning (Boylan & Bonham, 2007). Martinez and Bain (2013) found that a majority of remedial education courses are taught by part-time instructors or those with little preparation for teaching remedial content. Institutions typically deliver remedial education in three modes: standard remedial courses, which provide traditional semester courses with class instruction and labs; modified remedial courses, which are self-paced classes, tutoring sessions, supplemental student instruction meetings, online courses, and other student services directly related to remedial courses; and special programs, which are typically designed for high-need or high-risk students and may include learning communities or cohort based learning combined with, again, specialized remedial student services (Martinez & Bain, 2013).

Many students require some form of remediation upon entering college. According to student outcomes on the ACT, a widely-used college readiness assessment, only 52% of ACT-tested graduates were determined to be college ready in reading content. Additionally, only 43% of students were college ready in math (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Statistics about the number of students enrolled in remedial courses nationwide differ according to data sources, but the proportion of academically underprepared students across sources is substantial. Martinez and Bain (2013) noted that about 40% of all first-year students require remedial education before they enroll in credit-bearing courses. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimated that of college students under the age of 25 during the 2008 school year, 44% of all students at public two-year institutions and 27% of all students at public four-year institutions enrolled in a remedial education course (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Carter (2013) noted that as many as 1.7 million first-year students take a remedial course in the subjects of math, reading, or writing. Additionally, the Center for Community College Student Engagement estimated that 68% of students need some form of developmental education (CCCSE, 2016). Yet, despite the large number of students requiring remediation, Mitchell (2014) discovered that only about 40% of students entering community colleges actually enrolled in at least one remedial course, and only about one out in four of these students were predicted to complete a degree or certificate program.

This issue of the *Texas Education Review* focuses on developmental education, a significant barrier to student success and degree completion. In this particular piece, I will discuss particular issues associated developmental education and current practices for improvement.

## **Issues Associated with Developmental Education**

In theory, developmental education seems like a viable solution to the problem of academic under-preparedness, as these courses provide students an opportunity to brush up on skills and prepare for college classes. However, there are several issues associated with remediation, including assessment and placement of students into these courses, associated costs, persistence to degree completion, and other success outcomes, all of which will be explored in the subsequent sections.

### **College Readiness and Placement**

Students' perceptions of their college preparation often do not align with what institutional assessments reveal. Data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement showed that 86% of community college students believe that they are academically prepared for college-level coursework. Yet, 68% of students take at least one developmental education course (CCCSE, 2016). Additional research suggests that processes for placing students into remedial courses are both inconsistent and flawed. While some states make decisions about remedial course assignment through multiple measures of student preparation, the majority of states use standardized placement tests, such as Accuplacer from College Board. Students are placed into remedial courses if they do not score high enough on a placement test to test out of these courses. However, misplacement is an issue: Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2014) note that between one-fifth to one-third of students are wrongly placed into remedial courses, even across different assessment measures, including COMPASS and ACCUPLACER. Not only is misplacement an issue, but also the majority of intake and assessment processes nationwide are confusing for and are poorly communicated to students (Fulton, 2012).

Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2014) found that using multiple measures for placement, including using high school GPA and courses completed, rather than solely relying on results from placement exams, prove to be viable options for improvement of assessment and placement practices. Additional recommendations include requiring regular validity evaluations of assessments; incorporating more precise and multiple assessments; and developing more effective systems for transitioning students into postsecondary programs (Fulton, 2012).

### **Persistence**

Placement into developmental education can significantly slow students' progression to degree completion. In their study on full-time, first-time in college students, Nguyen Barry and Dannenberg (2016) found that students referred to developmental education were 74% more likely to drop out of college than their first-time in college, their full-time, first-time in college non-developmental student counterparts. Overall, less than one in 10 developmental students complete their bachelor's degrees within six years (Schak, Metzger, Bass, McCann, & English, 2017). Remediation can be most harmful for developmental students who scored close to the college-level cut-off score on their placement exams, also known as "bubble students" (Park, Woods, Hu, Bertrand Jones, & Tandberg, 2018). In their study, Boatman and Terry Long (2010) found that bubble students completed less college-level courses than other students over a three-year period.

These classes can also add thousands of dollars in added tuition costs, as students are required to take more courses in order to complete their degrees or certificates. Developmental courses often do not count for college credit (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014). The average developmental course load for a student is 2.6 courses (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014). Forty-four percent of developmental students take between one and three courses,

while 14% take more than that (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). Additionally, many students who could benefit from taking remedial courses may be advised by college staff not to take these courses (Crisp & Delgado, 2014), meaning that these students could be missing out on opportunities to learn foundational skills and knowledge. Attrition rates are high for students who do enroll in a developmental sequence, as less than half of students recommended for remediation complete their required courses (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

As you can see, developmental education presents several problems. Several current practices and policies prove to be ineffective because students are not advancing in their academic pathways and, instead, become trapped.

### **Innovations in Developmental Education**

In addition to using multiple measures for developmental assessment, both accelerated remediation, which condenses the time students spend in remediation, and computer-assisted developmental math courses are also new approaches to improving college completion rates (CCCSE, 2016).

Placement of remedial students into corequisite courses is also a strategy that many states are using to propel students through remediation. The corequisite model involves concurrently enrolling students who place into remedial courses into both a developmental class and a college-level course; this allows students to learn from peers in the college-level course while receiving fundamental skills and support in their developmental courses. Research shows that developmental students who enroll in college-level courses pass at rates similar to those students who directly enrolled in these courses (Hern & Snell, 2014). Many states have or are moving to a corequisite model, including Tennessee, Indiana, West Virginia, Georgia, and Colorado (Garcia Mathewson, 2016). Texas is also replacing traditional developmental methods with corequisites. In 2017, Texas Representative Helen Giddings authored House Bill 2223, a law mandating that all public colleges and universities shift 25% of their developmental programs to corequisite models by 2018 (Watkins, 2017). Schools then must increase their corequisite offerings to 50% by 2019 and 75% by 2020. The bill was passed in August 2017, and public institutions in Texas are currently gearing up for its implementation (Smith, 2017).

### **Moving Forward**

Developmental education has been and will continue to be a substantial barrier for millions of students unless research-based policy changes are effected. Increased attention to this issue in both academic and policy realms are already prompting substantial reform efforts. Discussions about remediation through should also consider institutional responsibilities. Overall, community colleges carry much of the weight in terms of preparing remedial students for coursework. It is not uncommon for four-year institutions to pass the responsibility of providing remedial courses and services to community colleges, creating a divide in educational instruction between the two- and four-year sectors (Martinez & Bain, 2013; Saxon & Boylan, 2001). While remedial education is central to the educational mission of community college, largely because of the open-access nature of the institutions (Martinez & Bain, 2013), responsibility should be shared across sectors, notably through an examination of curricular offerings and transfer pathways between institutions. If institutions fail to recognize their role in aiding students successfully progress through developmental education, the dreams of millions of students will be at stake. Institutions should also closely examine what skills students actually need to learn and align courses with students' programs of study and educational goals.

In the pieces that follow in this issue of the *Texas Education Review*, staff at both the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) expand on the nuances of and problems associated with developmental education, particularly at community colleges. The first piece, authored by E. Michael Bohlig, Colleen Bullock, Marisol Garza, Kyle Lovseth, and Hongwei Yu of CCCSE, examined the relationship between developmental course completion and associate degree or certificate completion rates. In the subsequent piece, Nikki Edgecombe and Susan Bickerstaff, of CCRC, discussed developmental education reform and introduce a reframing of how colleges and universities deem students “college ready.” Both of these pieces seek to push our understanding of developmental education reforms to generate future avenues for research and discussion.

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